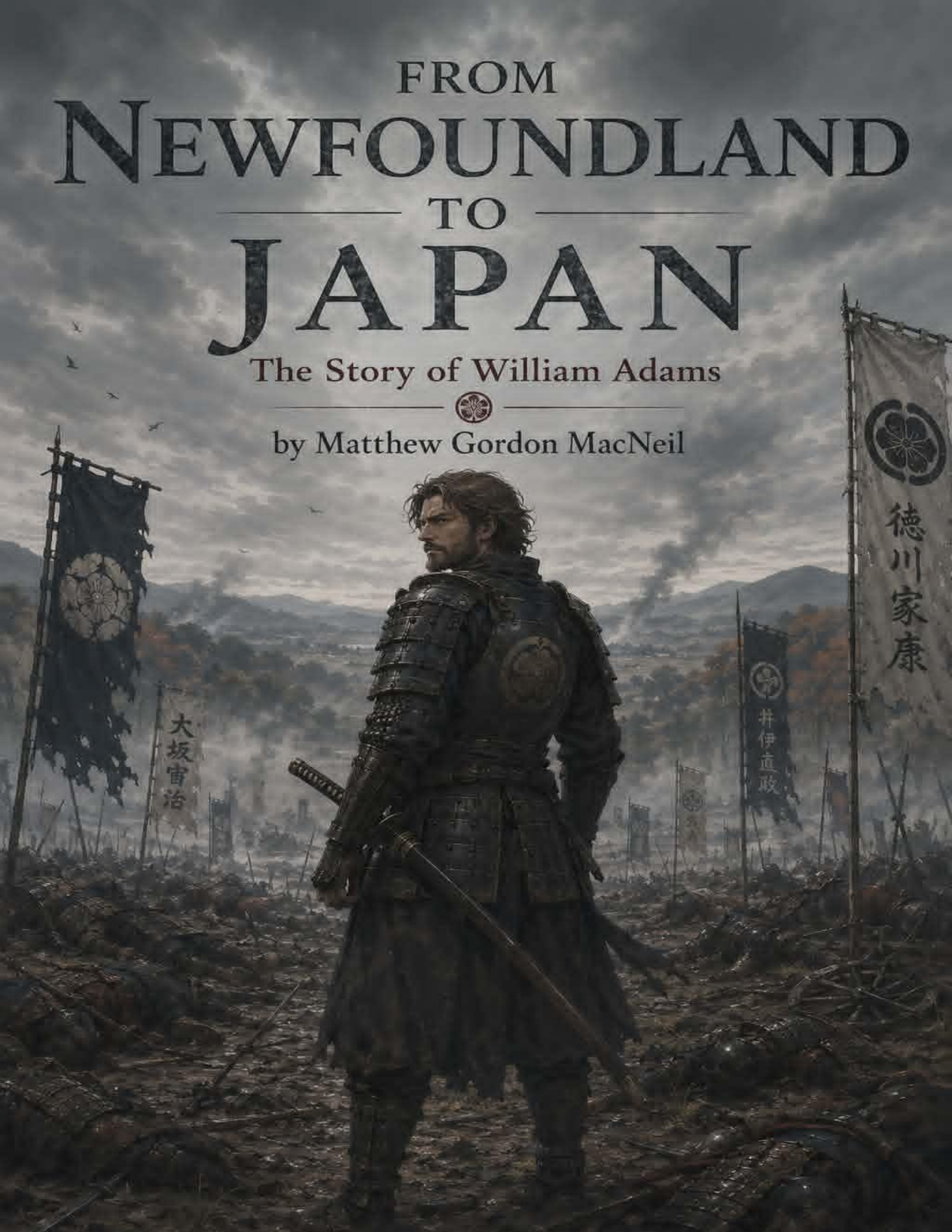
FROM NEWFOUNDLAND TO JAPAN

The Story of William Adams

by Matthew Gordon MacNeil



From Newfoundland to Japan: The story of William Adams

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The name William Adams, to those who know a bit of Japanese history, stirs the imagination as, according to official history, he was the first Englishman to set foot in the country and the first (and only) man from Britain to be made a Samurai.

Both assertions, in my personal opinion, are incorrect and in future works I hope to illustrate better the contact between

the West and Japan which predated Adams by many centuries, but nonetheless Adams was an important figure in Edo period Japan and it is his story I would like to tell.

His life began in the small village of Gillingham, in Kent, England, on September 24th, 1565. His father, John, was originally from the Scottish Highlands and belonged to Clan MacGregor, his surname being MacAdams before he shortened it to Adams when he crossed the English border.

William's mother was a Welshwoman, Sarah Edwards who, with her family in the 1550s, moved to England seeking work. She and John met in the village market when he was on leave, being a sailor.

The two, feeling mutual attraction, started to court and eventually married in 1563. William was their first, and as fate would have it, only child. Sarah did not long survive the birth, passing away less than a week after due to infection.

John, away across the Atlantic in the newly established fishing village of Avalon on the eastern coast of Newfoundland, did not learn of his son's birth for many months. When he finally did he returned to England, placing William in the care of his sister in law, Catherine Woodson, who raised the boy until he was four, by which time John took him with him to Newfoundland.

It may surprise some to know Newfoundland was settled by this time as many think the English did not settle in the province until 1610 but the truth is that small numbers of Englishmen and their families had made homes there since the late 1550s, some permanently while others fished there in summer and returned to England in winter.

Avalon, a village build of rough looking cabins, was by no means a comfortable settlement to call home for most but John and his fellow sailors and their families made it run smoothly. Relations with a local Beothuk band, one of the Native peoples of the Island along with the Mi'kmaq, were good if periodic.

The Beothuk, shy by nature, tended to keep to the interior of the island for the most part, only coming to Avalon and other settlements to trade meat and animal furs in exchange for knives, pots, pans, and hatchets.

William's childhood consisted of playing with other children along the shores, and hunting with his father in the winters aided by a Beothuk hunter William called 'Sam' as he had trouble saying his actual name, Samyowin, meaning Light on his Feet.

Unlike most of his people Sam enjoyed spending his time among the English, learning the language quickly and in turn teaching the sailors, including John, Beothuk. While struggling

to learn it in his youth, by his middle teens William learned it too.

At the age of ten he took to the seas for the first time. Despite the claims he studied shipbuilding under a man named Nicholas Diggins, this was a different William Adams who never left England.

Almost from the start he loved the sea, especially the spray that splashed up on deck. He enjoyed the salty smell and listening to the stories of the older sailors, especially his father.

John, ever the Scotsman, told his son of the many battles between the Scots and the English. Of their descent, as per MacGregor tradition, from Prince Gregor, son of King Alpin Mac Echdach of Dal Riata and younger brother of Kenneth MacAlpin, who founded Clan MacGregor in the Scottish Highlands.

Tales of Fairies, Boggarts, and Brownies were also favorites, William finding the Little People a fascinating topic.

By eighteen he returned to England with John but tragically William's father died shortly after arriving back in Kent, suffering a choking sensation and chest pain before passing away in the small hours of Monday, November 25th.

Left alone the younger Adams tracked down his aunt

Catherine, now an elderly widow, asking if he could stay with her. After a thorough questioning period where she confirmed for herself he was in fact her nephew she did welcome him into her home.

He worked as a farmhand for a time but soon, hearing the call of the sea, William abandoned the farm to go back to the sailing life, getting swept up in the Anglo-Spanish War two years later.

Serving in the English navy during the early years of the conflict Adams saw action against the legendary Spanish Armada, suffering a shoulder wound during a boarding action resulting in him nearly being knocked off into the waters below.

Adams survived the Armada and would go on to hire on with a Dutch trading company after his term of service finished in 1590.

For the next nine years he sailed around Europe and made his home in the Netherlands, living a largely uneventful life as a sailor. He did return to Newfoundland in 1595, staying in Avalon for a few months with friends of his father's and went hunting with Sam one last time, the Beothuk taking him on a Caribou expedition, the two men spending two weeks on the move but finding nothing.

Sam, feeling he had nothing keeping him tied to the island, having no wife or children, asked William if he minded him traveling back to Europe with him. Adams was delighted by the idea, he missed having someone from home to speak with.

Going by Samuel (William's suggestion) the Beothuk sailed back to the Netherlands with Adams and his crew, finding both friendly faces and prejudice on the ship he worked as a scullion.

In 1599 William and Sam, while in Amsterdam, signed up to sail on the Hoop Captained by Thomas Cornelius Jans, a seasoned Dutchman who wanted to sail East into Asia, hoping to either find silver or diamonds in China and Japan.

Neither fancied themselves treasure hunters but a job was a job. They reached China by early 1600, docking in Macao, then under Portuguese rule. Here William and Sam spent their time drinking with local men and regaling them with stories of North American life, none ever hearing tell of this continent before they arrived.

Jans, desperate for his easy earnings, never did find treasure in China. Try as he might the Dutch Captain went around in circles until on April 1st, having enough with crooks and liars, left the colony, hoping to have better luck in Japan.

But Lady Fortuna, caring not for human desire, was not with him here either. Soon after leaving Macao, on April 3rd, the Hoop entered into a typhoon and was nearly destroyed, going aground on the coast of Bungo province on the Japanese island of Kyushu.

William and the rest of the crew stepped off the ship to be immediately surrounded by Japanese men with spears. Ashigaru, warrior peasants.

They raised their hands, showing they meant no harm. The Ashigaru, treating them as prisoners from the outset, forced them to march inland to the castle of Lord Otomo Yoshimune, the head of the Otomo Clan and ruler of Bungo Province.

The Dutch (and English) weren't the first foreigners to come to Otomo's domain. Portuguese priests and friars had been coming for years by then, all eagerly trying to convert the man and his household to Catholicism. He humoured them, as many Japanese did, but he never seriously considered Christianity.

With the Dutch Otomo saw an opportunity to open up new trading routes for his land, welcoming the foreigners into his castle. Here William and the others stayed for five days, living comfortably under Otomo's hospitality while the Lord sent a messenger to bring Jesuits to translate for him.

This, however, proved to be the undoing of the crew. The Jesuits, concerned that Protestants would influence the Japanese and convert them to their 'heresy' and away from Holy Mother Church, decided to lie in order to save souls.

They told Yoshimune that, far from being traders, these Europeans were pirates come to plunder!

Otomo, trusting the priests enough to take their word on it, not knowing (or caring) of the bitter hatred between Catholics and Protestants, ordered the Captain to be executed immediately and William and the others thrown into prison

Jans was beheaded on the spot and his crew languished in the prison underneath the castle for a week, being given bread and water to live on.

Otomo planned on having all the men killed but before he did so he wanted official approval from his Lord, Tokugawa Ieyasu, Lord of Edo, sending a Jesuit to the city to inform him of what was happening in Bungo.

Contrary to what Otomo expected Ieyasu, intrigued by the news of an Englishman and a brown skinned foreigner with him, asked for them to be sent to him.

Disappointed he could not follow through on the execution of 'criminals' Otomo followed orders, placing William and Sam in chains and, under the escort of Jesuits, taken to Edo.

Tokugawa met the two in his private quarters, guarded by two retiners. The Lord of Edo took particular interest in Adams, noting he was of English birth but came from a land far from both England and Japan.

Ieyasu asked him about Newfoundland, specifically about its people to which Adams replied its Native peoples were Sam's, though Tokugawa seemed uninterested in talking with the Beothuk directly.

Through Adams Tokugawa, who was the most powerful man in Japan at this time, being the guardian of the Shogun, Toyotomi Hideyori, the young son of his former Master Toyotomi Hideyoshi, wanted to establish trade connections with the East India Company. He offered Adams and Sam a place in his court if Adams helped him in this endeavor.

Having little choice, William agreed.

In the coming days Adams and Tokugawa spent hours discussing England and her enemies, Willian informing the nobleman that at the current time Spain was the greatest threat to the English State, followed by Portugal.

This revelation made Ieyasu rethink the Jesuits intentions regarding the foreigners. The Catholic Order sought to have them executed as pirates but, as Adams explained, they did so because he was a Protestant, a 'true' Christian as he believed,

while they served Satan. Ieyasu, like most Japanese, didn't care to know the theological differences between the two Christian Schools of Thought. He dismissed the execution requests and tasked William with teaching his men how to use European weapons such as cannons and muskets.

Taking to his new job Adams trained Ieyasu's men to the best of his abilities, going out on campaign with them and witnessing the end of the Sengoku Era and the rise of the House of Tokugawa.

The greatest battle he and Sam saw service in was the Battle of Sekigahara on October 21st, 1600, which was the battle in which Ieyasu firmly brought Japan under his control after defeating his rivals.

By 1601 Adams and Sam were considered regulars at the Tokugwa court, receiving an allowance of rice for their services. Sam served as William's messenger between himself and the Shogun. Despite beginning their lives in Japan as prisoners the two Newfoundlanders integrated well into Japanese society.

In 1603 Ieyasu, greatly pleased in Adams, granted him a mansion in Edo along with servants to attend it. William allowed Sam to live with him and the two continued to aid the Japanese in strengthening connections to the West.

Perhaps the best known fact about William is that he was made a Samurai and given the Japanese Miura Anjin, which took place in 1604, Ieyasu continuing to recognize his contributions to his rule.

Sam, while not becoming Samurai, was granted the right to wear a Katana by the Shogun, a great honour in itself.

Sadly in the fall of 1606 Sam took ill after a meal, his body burning up. He died a few days later after slipping into unconsciousness.

William grieved for his friend for many years, his final connection to his home severed. After Sam's death Adams threw himself into Japanese life and gave up any thought of going back to Europe or Newfoundland.

Shortly after Sam's passing Ieyasu arranged a marriage between William and Magome Oyuki, daughter of Magome Kageyu, a low ranking official in Edo, further securing the Newfoundlander's loyalty to Japan.

Together with Oyuki William had two children, a son, Joseph, and a daughter, Susannah. In later years Adams would father children outside of his marriage with mistresses whom he never acknowledged.

For the rest of his life William worked with the Tokugawa Shogunate to expand their interests with Europeans,

becoming Captain of several Japanese expeditions, including to China and Siam (present day Thailand). He never asked to return to England, and besides letters, he never communicated with those in Newfoundland.

On the 16th of May, 1620 William Adams passed away in Hirano, aged fifty five, and was buried there next to a memorial built to honour Catholic Saint Francis Xavier, an irony he would have smiled at.

His son Joseph inherited his position and his name, carrying out his duties as best he could as his father had shown him. Susannah would travel to Newfoundland in 1628 but died soon after arriving, buried in an unmarked grave.

Adams, while by no means the first man of Britain to go to Japan, contact between the British Isles and the land of the Rising Sun stretching back thousands of years, proved to be one of the most influential and honoured, earning his way into the highest echelons of Japanese society by his skills alone.